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CRS Issue Statement on the United Nations

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The 111th Congress will continue to address a number of issues concerning the United Nations and the U.N. system, with a particular focus on how the organization is functioning and serving U.S. interests. A key issue facing Congress is the appropriate level of U.S. funding for the United Nations. Congress will be called on to authorize and appropriate funds for the U.N. system, which is comprised of various interconnected components, including specialized agencies, voluntary funds and programs, peacekeeping operations, and the U.N. organization itself.

Congress may consider the policy actions most likely to advance reform efforts at the United Nations. As the single largest financial contributor to the U.N. system, the United States has maintained an ongoing interest in promoting the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. Specifically, Congress has focused on management and budget reform initiatives, particularly enhanced internal oversight and increased fiscal discipline. Congress has also expressed concern over allegations of waste, fraud, and abuse in the U.N. system, including procurement practices. In the past, Congress has sought to link U.S. funding of its assessed contributions to specific reform benchmarks. Previous Administrations have strongly advocated for U.N. reform, but have resisted linking payment of U.S. regular budget contributions to progress on reform.

Members of Congress may wish to take some factors into account when considering efforts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the United Nations. The decentralized nature of the U.N. system, for example, makes it difficult for U.N. member states and the Secretariat to implement system-wide reforms. Individual member states also hold disparate views on the definition of U.N. reform, as well as how to best implement reforms and evaluate the success or failure of a given initiative.

In its second session, the 111th Congress may also be interested in the role of the United Nations in promoting international peace and security through: decisions and resolutions made in the U.N. Security Council; U.N. peacekeeping activities, particularly in the Middle East and Africa; and U.N. political missions such as the U.N. Assistance Missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Congress may also focus on U.N. member state efforts to address other key policy issues in U.N. fora, including refugees and other displaced populations, international humanitarian aid, and climate change.

Congress may also demonstrate a continued interest in the effectiveness of U.N. human rights mechanisms, including the Human Rights Council. Additionally, the Senate may in the second session consider providing its advice and consent to ratification of international human rights conventions such as the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Members of Congress will likely consider these policy issues in the broader context of the Administration's plans for national security and foreign assistance reform, though any potential impact on congressional appropriations for the U.N. system remains to be seen.

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